

Page 2. Fish and seafood

Māori have always had a great passion for fish and seafood, which was a major part of their traditional diet. Pākehā have only come around to celebrating it relatively recently.

Food of the poor

Throughout the 19th century and for most of the 20th there was a lingering attitude, inherited from Britain, that fish was the food of the poor and was to be avoided by those who came out to the colonies for a better life. Such aspirations were generally fulfilled in that most New Zealanders could afford to eat large quantities of beef and lamb. However, fish was still eaten.

Fish consumption

According to official estimates, annual fish consumption was around 10 kilograms per person in the 1930s, probably mainly in the form of fish and chips. Consumption declined to only 2 kilograms in the early 1970s. It is possible that official figures were significantly underestimated – figures compiled by the seafood industry gave 10 kilograms per head in the 1970s.

The New Zealand Fishing Industry Board was established in 1971 with the express purpose of encouraging New Zealanders not only to eat more fish, but to eat a greater variety of species that had come on to the market. According to official estimates, per-head consumption then rose to 10–20 kilograms in the 1980s, and reached 27 kilograms in the early 2000s.

Slurping oysters

Oyster picnics were popular on the shores of the Hauraki Gulf in the 19th century. Eliza Jones harvested oysters from a bed very close to her garden. She wrote: ‘As we were both very fond of [oysters], Humphrey [her brother] soon procured the proper knives for opening them. We often used to go down to the rocks to feast on oysters, taking with us a supply of bread and butter with vinegar and pepper.’¹

Since the 1950s consumption of fish has broadened from fewer than 10 of the 90–100 edible species, to some 20–30 species. There has been a marked change in attitude towards certain species. Hāpuku (groper) and blue cod were seen as undesirable species for eating in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but were both prized by the 1980s.

Other seafood

Crayfish has seen a similar rise in status. Until the late 1940s crayfish were ignored by most Pākehā. Since they were sold ready-boiled, crayfish were even despised as the food of drunkards who were too slovenly to cook. After crayfish tails began to be exported to North America in the 1950s, they rapidly became a luxury food.

Oysters have always had general appeal to Māori and Pākehā alike, but mussels only gained in status when they were farmed commercially in the 1970s. Pāua (abalone) gained acceptability among Pākehā after 1960, when they became commercially available and sold in fish-and-chip shops as patties.

Confused diner

In the 1980s Topo Gigio restaurant in Auckland sold broad squid grilled whole, rather than cut into rings and deep-fried. New Zealanders were not used to this method of cooking and serving squid. One diner sent her squid back to the kitchen, saying it wasn't what she had ordered. When she was told that it was a whole squid, she said she thought squid were small rings that drifted around the sea.

Squid attracted New Zealanders' interest after Japanese boats began offshore fishing in 1969, and by the 1980s squid rings were common in restaurants. Kina (sea urchins), tuatua and pipi (both shellfish) are still collected mainly by Māori, although commercially harvested little-neck clams (cockles) are now sold in some supermarkets.

Footnotes:



How to cite this page:

David Burton, 'Food - Fish and seafood', Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/food/page-2> (accessed 12 March 2018)

Story by David Burton, published 5 Sep 2013
